

# NAN of MUSIC MOUNTAIN

By Frank H. Spearman  
Author of Whispering Smith

NAN AND DE SPAIN TAKE WILD CHANCES OF BEING CAUGHT IN THEIR CLANDESTINE LOVE-MAKING AND THE GIRL FINALLY GETS INTO TROUBLE THROUGH SASSOON'S SPYING

Henry de Spain, general manager of the stagecoach line running from Thief River to Sleepy Cat, railroad division town in the Rocky mountains, is fighting a band of cattle thieves and gunmen living in Morgan gap, a fertile valley 20 miles from Sleepy Cat and near Calabasas, where the coach horses are changed. De Spain has killed two of the gang and has been seriously wounded. He and pretty Nan Morgan, niece of the gang leader, are secretly in love, but fear trouble if they attempt to marry.

## CHAPTER XVII.

### Danger.

When she tiptoed into her uncle's room at midnight, Nan's heart beat as the wings of a bird beat from the broken door of a cage into a forbidden sky of happiness. She had left the room a girl; she returned a woman.

Sleep she did not expect or even ask for; the night was all too short to think of those tense, fearful moments that had pledged her to her lover. When the anxieties of her situation overwhelmed her, as they would again and again, she felt herself in the arms of this strange, resolute man whom all her own hatred and whom she knew she already loved beyond all power to put away. In her heart, she had tried this more than once—she knew she could not, would not, ever do it, or even try to do it, again.

She rejoiced in his love. She trusted. When he spoke she believed this man whom no one around her would believe; and she, who never had believed what other men avowed, and who de-tested their avowals, believed De Spain, and secretly, guiltily, glowed in every word of his devotion and breathed faint in its every caress.

Night could hardly come fast enough, after the next long day. A hundred times during that day she reminded herself, while the slow, majestic sun shone shimmering on the hot desert, that she had promised to steal out into the grounds the minute darkness fell—he would be waiting. A hundred times in the long afternoon Nan looked into the cloudless western sky and with puny, eager hands would have pushed the lagging orb on its course that she might sooner give herself into the arms where she felt her place so sure, her honor safe, her helplessness so protected, herself so loved.

How her cheeks burned after supper when she asked her uncle for leave to post a letter downtown! How breathless with apprehension she halted as De Spain stepped from the shadow of the trees and drew her importantly beneath them for the kiss that had burned on her troubled lips all day! How, girl-like, knowing his caresses were all her own—knowing she could at an instant call forth enough to smother her—she tyrannized his importuning, and like a lovely misler, hoarded her responsiveness under calm eye and laconic whispers until, when she did give back his eagerness, she made his senses reel.

How dreamily she listened to every word he let fall in his outpouring of devotion; how gravely she put up her hand to restrain his busy intrusion, and asked if he knew that no man in the world, least of all her fierce and burly cousin, had ever touched her lips until he himself forced a kiss on them the night before. "And now?" She hid her face against his shoulder. "Oh, Henry, how I love you! I'm so ashamed I couldn't tell you if it weren't night; I'll never look you in the face again in the daytime."

And when he told her how little he himself had had to do with, and how little he knew about girls, even from boyhood, how she feigned not to believe, and believed him still! They were two children raised in the magic of an hour to the supreme height of life and dizzy together on its summit.

"I don't see how you can care for me, Henry. Oh, I mean it," she protested, holding her head resolutely up. "You know who we are, away off there in the mountains. Everyone hates us. I suppose they've plenty of reason to: we hate everybody else. And why shouldn't we? We're at war with everyone. You know, better than I do, what goes on in the gap. I don't want to know; I try not to know; Uncle Duke tries to keep things from me—that day on Music—I couldn't believe you meant it at all. And yet—I'm afraid I liked to try to think you did. When you looked at me I felt as if you could see right through me."

Confidences never came to an end. And diplomacy came into its own almost at once in De Spain's efforts to improve his relations with the implacable Duke. The day came when Nan's uncle could be taken home. De Spain sent to him a soft-spoken emissary, Bob Scott, offering to provide a light stage, with his compliments, for the trip. The intractable mountaineer, with his refusal to accept the olive branch, blew Bob out of the room.

Nan was crushed by the result, but De Spain was not to be dismayed.

Lefever came to him the day after Nan had got her uncle home. "Henry," he began without any preliminaries, "there is one thing about your precipitate ride up Music mountain that I never got clear in my mind. After the fight, your cartridge belt was hanging up in the barn at Calabasas for two weeks. You walked in to us that morning with your belt buckled on. You told us you put it on before you came upstairs. What? Oh, yes, I know, Henry. But that belt wasn't hanging downstairs with your coat earlier in the evening. No, Henry, it wasn't—not when I looked. Don't tell me such things, because—I don't know. Where was the belt when you found it?"

"Some distance from the coat, John. I admit that. I'll tell you: some one had moved the belt. It was not where I left it. I was hurried the morning I rode in, and I can't tell you just where I found it."

Lefever never batted an eyelash. "I know you can't, Henry. Because you won't. That Scotch hybrid McAlpin knows a few things, too, that he won't tell. All I want to say is, you can trust that man too far. He's got all my recent salary. Every time Jeffries raises my pay that hairy-pawed horse-doctor reduces it just so much a month. And he does it with one pack of fifty-two small cards that you could stick into your vest pocket."

"McAlpin has a wife and children to support," suggested De Spain.

"Don't think for a moment he does it," returned Lefever vehemently. "I support his wife and children myself."

"You shouldn't play cards, John."

"It was by playing cards that I located Sassoon, just the same. A little game with your friend Bull Page, by the way. And say, that man blew into Calabasas one day here lately with a twenty-dollar bill; it's a fact. Now, where do you suppose he got twenty dollars in one bill? I know I



"Where Was the Belt When You Found It?"

had it two hours after he got there, and then in fifteen minutes that blamed bullwhacker you put thirty-two a week to look it away from me. But I got Sassoon spotted. And where do you suppose Split-lips is this minute?"

"Morgan's gap."

"Quite so—and been there all the time. Now, Bob has the old warrant for him—the question is, how to get him out."

De Spain reflected a moment before replying: "John, I'd let him alone just for the present," he said at length. Lefever's eyes bulged. "Let Sassoon alone?"

"He'll keep—for a while, anyway."

"What do you mean?"

"I don't want to stir things up too strong over that way just at the minute, John."

"Why not?"

De Spain shuffled a little. "Well, Jeffries thinks we might let things rest till Duke Morgan and the others get over some of their soreness."

Lefever, astonished at the indifference of De Spain to the opportunity

of nabbing Sassoon, while he could be found, expostulated strongly. When De Spain persisted, Lefever, huffed, confided to Bob Scott that when the general manager got ready he could catch Sassoon himself.

De Spain wanted for Nan's sake, as well as his own, to see what could be done to pacify her uncle and his relatives so that a wedge might be driven in between them and their notorious henchman, and Sassoon brought to book with their consent; on this point, however, he was not quite bold-faced enough to take his friends into his confidence.

De Spain, as fiery a lover as he was a fighter, stayed none of his courting because circumstances put Music mountain between him and his mistress. And Nan, after she had once surrendered, was nothing behind in the chances she unhesitatingly took to arrange her meetings with De Spain. He found in her, once her girlish timidity was overcome and a woman's confidence had replaced it, a disregard of consequences, so far as their own play was concerned, that sometimes took away his breath.

The very day after she had got her uncle home, with the aid of Satterlee Morgan and an antiquated spring wagon, Nan rode, later in the afternoon, over to Calabasas. The two that would not be restrained had made their appointment at the lower lava beds halfway between the gap and Calabasas. The sun was sinking behind the mountain when De Spain galloped out of the rocks as Nan turned from the trail and rode toward the black and weather-beaten meeting place.

They could hardly slip from their saddles fast enough to reach each other's arms—Nan, trim as a model in fresh khaki, trying with a handkerchief hardly larger than a postage stamp to wipe the flecks of dust from her pink cheeks, while De Spain, between dabs, covered them with impetuous greetings. Looking engrossed into each other's eyes, and both, in their eagerness, talking at once, they led their horses into hiding and sat down to try to tell all that had happened since their parting. Wars and rumors of wars, feuds and railings, fights and pursuits, were no more to them than to babes in the woods. All that mattered to them—sitting or pacing together and absorbed in the path of the long-cold volcanic stream buried in the shifting sands of the desert—was that they should clasp each other's clinging hands, listen each to the other's answering voice, look unrestrained into each other's eyes.

They met in both the lava beds—the upper lay between the gap and town—more than once. And one day came a scare. They were sitting on a little ledge well up in the rocks where De Spain could overlook the trail east and west, and were talking about a bungalow some day to be built on the west toward Calabasas. There were three in the party, one lagging well behind. The two men leading, Nan and De Spain made out to be Gale Morgan and Page. They saw the man coming on behind stop his horse and lean forward, his head bent over the trail. He was examining the sand and halted quite a minute to study something. Both knew what he was studying—the hoofprints of Nan's pony heading toward the lava. Nan shrank back and with De Spain moved a little to where they could watch the intruder without being seen. Nan whispered first: "It's Sassoon." De Spain nodded. "What shall we do?" breathed Nan.

"Nothing yet," returned her lover, watching the horseman, whose eyes were still fixed on the pony's trail, but who was now less than a half-mile away and riding straight toward them.

De Spain, his eyes on the danger and his hand laid behind Nan's waist, led the way guardedly down to where their horses stood. Nan, needing no instructions for the emergency, took the lines of the horses, and De Spain, standing beside his own horse, reached his right hand over in front of the pommel and regarding Sassoon all the while, drew his rifle slowly from its scabbard. The blood flew from his cheeks. She said nothing. Without looking at her, De Spain drew her own rifle from her horse's side, passed it into her hand, and moving over in front of the horses, laid his left hand reassuringly on her waist again. At that moment, little knowing what eyes were on him in the black fragments ahead, Sassoon looked up. Then he rode more slowly forward. The color returned to Nan's cheeks. "Do you want me to use this?" she murmured indicating the rifle.

"Certainly not. But if the others turn back, I may need it. Stay right here with the horses. He will lose the trail in a minute now. When he reaches the rock I'll go down and keep him from getting off his horse—he won't fight from the saddle."

But with an instinct better than knowledge, Sassoon, like a wolf scenting danger, stopped again. He scanned the broken and forbidding hump in front, now less than a quarter of a mile from him, questioning. His eyes seemed to rove inquisitively over the lava pile as if asking why a Morgan Gap pony had visited it. In another moment he wheeled his horse and spurred rapidly after his companions.

The two drew a deep breath. De Spain laughed. "What we don't know never hurts us." He drew up to him. Holding the rifle muzzle at arm's length as the butt rested on the ground, she looked up from the shoulder to which she was drawn. "What should you have done if he had come?"

"Taken you to the gap and then

taken him to Sleepy Cat, where he belongs."

"But, Henry, suppose—"

"There wouldn't have been any 'suppose.'"

"Suppose the others had come?"

"With one rifle, here, a man could stand off a regiment. Nan, do you know, you fit into my arm as if you were made for it?"

His courage was contagious. When he had tired her with fresh importunities he unplanned her felt hat and held it out of reach while he kissed and toyed with and disarranged her hair. In revenge, she snatched from his pocket his little black memorandum book and some letters and read, or pretended to read them, and seizing her opportunity she broke from him and ran with the utmost fleetness up into the rocks.

In two minutes they had forgotten the episode almost as completely as if it never had been. But when they left for home they agreed they would not meet there again. They knew that Sassoon, like a jackal, would surely come back, and more than once, until he found out just what that trail or any subsequent trail leading into the beds meant. The lovers laughed the jackal's spying to scorn and rode away, bantering, racing and chasing each other in the saddle, as solely concerned in their happiness as if there were nothing else of moment in the whole wide world.

## CHAPTER XVIII.

### Facing the Music.

They had not underestimated the danger from Sassoon's suspicious malevolence. He returned next morning to read what further he could among the rocks. It was little, but it spelled a meeting of two people—Nan and another—and he was stimulated to keep his eyes and ears open for further discoveries. Moreover, continuing ease in seeing each other, undetected by hostile eyes, gradually rendered the lovers less cautious in their arrangements.

De Spain, naturally reckless, had won in Nan a girl hardly more concerned. Self-reliant, both of them, and instinctively vigilant, they spent so much time together that Scott and Lefever, who, before a fortnight had passed after Duke's return home, surmised that De Spain must be carrying on some sort of a clandestine affair hinting toward the gap, only questioned how long it would be before something happened, and only hoped it would not be, in their own word, unpleasant. It was not their in any case to admonish De Spain, nor to dog the movements of so capable a friend, even when his safety was concerned, so long as he preferred to keep his own counsel—there are limits within which so man welcomes uninvited assistance. And De Spain, in his long and frequent rides, his prolonged absences, indifference to the details of business and careless humor, had evidently passed within these limits.

What was stage traffic to him compared to the sunshine on Nan's hair; what attraction had schedules to offer against a moment of her eyes; what pleasing connection could there be between bad-order wheels and her low laugh?

The two felt they must meet to discuss their constant perplexities and the problems of their difficult situation; but when they reached their trysting places, there was more of gaiety than gravity, more of nonchalance than concern, more of looking into each other's hearts than looking into the troublesome future. And there was hardly an inviting spot within miles of Music mountain that one or the other of the two had not waited near.

There were, of course, disappointments, but there were only a few failures in their arrangements. The difficulties of these fell chiefly on Nan. How she overcame them was a source of surprise to De Spain, who marveled at her innocent resource in escaping the demands at home and making her way, despite an array of obstacles, to his distant impatience.

Midway between Music mountain and Sleepy Cat a low-lying wall of lava rock, in part sand-covered and in part exposed, parallels and sometimes crosses the principal trail. This undulating ridge was a favorite with De Spain and Nan, because they could ride in and out of hiding places without more than just leaving the trail itself. To the west of this ridge, and commanding it, rose rather more than a mile away the cone called Black Cap.

"Suppose," said Nan one afternoon, looking from De Spain's side toward the mountains, "someone should be spying on us from Black Cap?" She pointed to the solitary rock.

"If anyone has been, Nan, with a good glass he must have seen exchanges of confidence that would make him gnash his teeth. I know if I ever saw anything like it I'd go hang. But the country around there is too rough for a horse. Nobody even hides around Black Cap, except some tramp hold-up man that's crowded in his get-away. Bob Scott says there are dozens of mountain lions over there."

But Sassoon had the unpleasant patience of a mountain lion and his dogged persistence, and, hiding himself on Black Cap, he made certain one day of what he had long been convinced—that Nan was meeting De Spain.

The day after she had mentioned Black Cap to her lover, Nan rode over to Calabasas to get a bride mended. Galloping back, she encountered Sassoon just inside the gap. Nan so detested him that she never spoke when she could avoid it. On his part, he pretended not to see her as she passed. When she reached home she

found her Uncle Duke and Gale standing in front of the fireplace in the living room. The two appeared from their manner to have been in a heated discussion, one that had stopped suddenly on her appearance. Both looked at Nan. The expression on their faces forewarned her. She threw her quilt on the table, drew off her riding gloves, and began to unpin her hat; but she knew a storm was impending.

Gale had been made for a long time to know that he was an unwelcome visitor, and Nan's greeting of him was the merest contemptuous nod. "Well, uncle," she said, glancing at Duke, "I'm late again. Have you had supper?"

Duke always spoke curtly; tonight his heavy voice was as sharp as an ax. "Been late a good deal lately."

Nan laid her hat on the table, and, glancing composedly from one suspicious face to the other, put her hands up to arrange her hair. "I'm going to try to do better. I'll go and get my supper if you've had yours." She started toward the dining room.

"Hold on!" Nan paused at her uncle's forceful command. She looked at him either really or feignedly surprised, her expression changing to one of indignation, and waited for him to



"You Coward!" She Cried.

speak. Since he did no more than glare angrily at her, Nan lifted her brows a little. "What do you want, uncle?"

"Where did you go this afternoon?"

"Over to Calabasas," she answered innocently.

"Who'd you meet there?" Duke's tone snapped with anger. He was working himself into a fury, but Nan saw it must be faced. "The same people I usually meet—why?"

"Did you meet Henry de Spain there this afternoon?"

Nan looked squarely at her cousin and returned his triumphant expression defiantly before she turned her eyes on her uncle. "No," she said collectedly. "Why?"

"See him anywhere else?"

"No, I did not. What do you mean? What," demanded his niece with spirit, "do you want to know? What are you trying to find out?"

Duke turned in his rage on Gale! "There! You hear that—that have you got to say now?" he demanded with an abusive oath.

Gale jumped forward, his finger pointed at Nan. "Look here, do you deny you are meeting Henry de Spain all over the desert? You met him down the Sleepy Cat trail near Black Cap, didn't you?"

Nan stood with her back against the end of the table where her uncle's first words had stopped her, and she looked sideways toward her cousin. In her answer he heard as much contempt as a girl's voice could convey to a rejected lover. "So you've turned sneak!"

Gale roared a string of bad words. "You hire that coyote Sassoon to spy for you, do you?" demanded Nan coolly. "Aren't you proud of your manly relation, uncle?" Duke was choking with rage. He tried to speak to her, but he could not form his words. "What is it you want to know, uncle? Whether it is true that I meet Henry de Spain? It is. I do meet him, and we're engaged to be married when you give us permission, Uncle Duke—and not till then."

"There you have it," cried Gale. "There's the story. I told you so. I've known it for a week. I tell you, Nan's face set. 'Not only,' continued her cousin jeeringly, 'meeting that—'

Almost before the vile epithet that followed had reached her ears, Nan caught up the whip. Before he could escape, she cut Gale sharply across the face. "You coward," she cried, trembling so she could not control her voice. "If you ever dare use that word before me again, I'll horsewhip you. Go to Henry de Spain's face, you skunk, and say that if you dare."

"Put down that quilt, Nan," yelled her uncle.

"I won't put it down," she exclaimed defiantly. "And he will get a good lashing with it if he says one more word about Henry de Spain."

"Put down that quilt, I tell you," thundered her uncle.

Old Duke Morgan decides to take matters into his own hands with De Spain. He goes to Sleepy Cat hunting the stage manager—and finds him. It's all told in the next installment.

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

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